

# South Africa's Most Notorious Criminals in History.

Crime in South Africa is a well-known hot topic of discussion. South Africa is currently rated as one of the most dangerous places to visit but for us living here it is part of life. South Africa has always had its fair share of criminal activities as else where in the world. This article will have a look at some of South-Africa's most notorious criminals, what they did and what happen to them.

## Racketeers, Bank Robbers, Hit-Men, Gangs, Death Squads, Human Trafficking, Murderers, Serial Killers and Spy's.

South-Africa has a rich criminal past and in this weekly series we will be looking at the most prominent of them. Some of which you might have never heard of.

### Daisy Louisa de Melker (Hancorn-Smith)

Gender:	Female
Birth:	July 01, 1886 Seven Fountains, Grahamstown,, Eastern Cape, South Africa
Death:	December 30, 1932 (46) Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa (Execution by hanging)
Place of Burial:	Pretoria, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa
Immediate Family:	Daughter of William Stringfellow Hancorn-Smith and Fanny Augusta Mathilda Hancorn-Smith Wife of William Alfred Cowle; Robert Sproat and Sidney Clarence de Melker Fiancée of Herbert George Fuller Mother of Twins Cowle; Rhodes Cecil Cowle; Lester Beresford Cowle and Alfred Eric Cowle Sister of John Hancorn-Smith; Gertrude Mary Hancorn-Smith; Alice Bird Raverty; Frederick Lawrence Hancorn-Smith; Nina Maude Hancorn-Smith; Florence Augusta Matilda MacLachlan; Ella Minnie Hancorn-Smith; Euphemia "Effie" Victoria Hancorn-Smith; Stella Hancorn-Smith and Dorothy Hunter Half sister of Nora Stych Mutton and Hilda Mary Mutton

On 17 October, 1932, at Johannesburg High Court, the trial of Daisy Louisa de Melker began. She was charged with the murder of two husbands and her twenty year-old son, Rhodes. The case attracted unprecedented public interest.



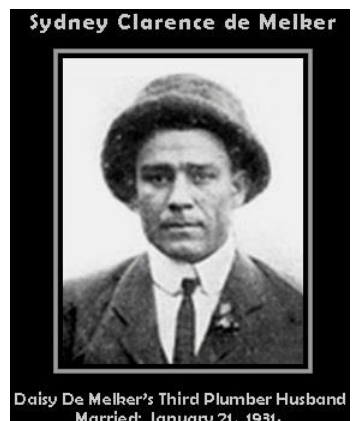
Daisy de Melker (née Hancorn-Smith) was born into a large family on June 1, 1886, near the Eastern Cape town of Grahamstown. In her early teens, she lived with her father in Bulawayo, in Zimbabwe, but returned to South Africa as a boarder at the Good Hope Seminary School in Cape Town. After another brief stint in Zimbabwe in 1903, the young woman headed back to train at the Berea Nursing Home in Durban.

While in Zimbabwe on holiday, De Melker met Bert Fuller. A romance developed between the two, but Fuller contracted black-water fever and died on the day the couple had planned to marry. He left De Melker a £100 bequest. She would be back keeping vigil at other bedsides ...

In March 1909, De Melker married William Alfred Cowle, a plumber, in Johannesburg. The couple had five children, four of whom died. In January 1923, William Cowle succumbed to an excruciatingly painful death.

Exactly one year after the death of her first husband, De Melker married Robert Sproat, also a plumber. On November 6, 1927 Sproat died after suffering similar symptoms to Cowle. De Melker was the beneficiary in both men's wills.

In January 1931, De Melker married Sydney Clarence de Melker. Like the other two husbands, he was a plumber.



**COWLE.**—Rhodes Cecil, aged 20 years, died on the 5th inst., the son of Mrs. D. L. de Melker (Sproat). Deeply mourned. Cortege will leave Swift's Parlour, 233, Bree Street, at 3.30 p.m. to-day (Sunday) for the New Cemetery. Friends kindly accept this intimation.—John Swift, Ltd., Undertakers.

relative of her second husband, raised the alarm.

Exhumations of her husbands' bodies revealed large amounts of strychnine; a second autopsy on her son found traces of arsenic, and the purchase of the poison was traced back to De Melker.

The motive for the killings of her husbands was financial gain and, if she hadn't murdered her son, it seems the black widow would have pulled off the perfect crimes.

The reason for murdering her son was never conclusively proved, but some have put forward the theory that Rhodes was, perhaps, after his own inheritance.

De Melker's trial lasted 30 days and the courthouse was packed – some people even paid for seats in the court. Daisy de Melker was accused of three murders but was only convicted of one, that of killing her son. The charges of poisoning her husbands were never proved in a court of law. It was William Sproat, the younger brother of her second husband, who accused her because he wanted Robert Sproat's will in favour of Daisy declared invalid. Daisy refused to refund an alleged loan from Mrs Jane Sproat, Robert's mother, to Robert; she regarded it as a gift and argued that it was not stipulated in the will as a loan. William Sproat won the civil case regarding the will, which ran concurrently with the murder trial, and was awarded costs. Daisy withdrew on the date Justice Greenberg sentenced her for murder. William's was a Pyrrhic victory however. To pay her exorbitant legal costs Daisy had to sell all her assets. On Friday December 30, 1932 De Melker was hanged at Pretoria Central prison. She was declared insolvent and was eventually buried in a prison pauper's grave.

The second woman to be hanged in South African history, De Melker has become a South African icon and a figure of popular myth. Ghost tours around Johannesburg still point out her haunts. It's rumoured that her spirit haunts Ward 7 of the former Transvaal Children's Hospital (now the Florence Transition Home) in Braamfontein, where she worked as a nurse and first learnt about poisons!

#### References:

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Just over a year later, in March 1932, Rhodes Cecil Cowle, De Melker's son, died – supposedly from cerebral malaria. But it was his death that was Daisy De Melker's fatal undoing; William Sprout, a

